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Can't vs. Won't

When a person (the learner) does not comply with your request, you have a choice. You can view the person as intentionally failing to do what you asked or you can view the person as having trouble complying because of a learning, thinking, understanding, feeling, or focus issue. Consider this: your least dangerous assumption is that the learner *CAN'T* do something. It can be very dangerous to assume that a learner *WON'T* do something.

Your safest assumption is that each learner is doing the best s/he can at this moment. Remember, no one really knows what another person is thinking or feeling by looking at them. We all have more complicated motives for our actions than just seeking attention or avoiding a task. An assumption of *WON'T* by parents/staff leads to punishment, resentment, and power struggles. No one wins. This can have lasting negative effects on the learner's mental health and social interactions.

An assumption of *CAN'T* leads to creative problem solving and analysis of the needs of the learner and the details of the environment. The learner is taught to view self objectively, ask for help, understand how s/he learns, and seek solutions. An assumption of *CAN'T* leads to an effort to take the point of view of the learner and an attempt to see the world from the perspective of the learner.

Why Might It Be Can't?

CAN'T: Variability of performance is characteristic of people with autism spectrum disorders and other disabilities. Each learner needs to be able to identify own strengths and needs for support and how these change in different situations.

CAN'T: Consider Gestalt or holistic processing: the learner absorbs the whole situation with all the details. Any change may lead to a loss of skill. This can cause the learner to look like s/he is not trying or attending. We need to be aware of the details when teaching and be willing to re-teach in new environments or when any element changes. Planned re-teaching in new environments supports and promotes generalization and success.

CAN'T: Problems in central coherence: the learner may be unable to select and focus upon the most relevant information in the situation. This can cause the learner to appear inattentive and unfocused.

CAN'T: The learner may be responding to something that is going on inside of them (an internal stimulus) or something that is going on outside of them (an external stimulus.) The stimulus may be capturing the learner's attention and energy and preventing them from complying. The learner may be experiencing a delay in processing or any of a number of neurobiological issues that are competing with what you want them to do.